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Synopsis

Graphic literature has had a long and chequered past. There is evidence of graphic narrative in the drawings of primitive cave dwellers in the Paleolithic age: images which still exist in nearly every part of the world. But the 'Graphic' mode of narrative has long been neglected in serious discussions in academic circles. Authors like Art Spiegelman and Marjane Sartrape have chosen to represent extreme conditions of social crisis in the graphic novel form. They decided to do so in spite of the fact that they had access to many canonical forms of writing and yet won critical acclaim even through their rejection of the mainstream method. They probably thought this narrative style has a better potential of capturing multiple meanings. In prose narratives words often contain multiple meanings. But it becomes immensely complicated when we realise that graphic novels contain both words and visuals: content that requires further deconstruction. So going by the logic extended by most, it is more difficult to read a graphic novel epistemologically than a printed prose narrative.

In European countries Graphic Literature has recently been considered as an area of serious discussion by critics. However, in India it is yet to be given the serious academic attention it deserves. Writers like Orijit Sen, Sarnath Banerjee, Amruta Patil, Visvajyoti Ghosh, Parishmita Singh – among many others – have taken up this graphic narrative as a form of socio-cultural expression going above and beyond the purely literal boundaries of acceptance and continuity . Taking up this form can pose difficulties for the writer as the writer has to have the ability to play with both words and images unlike the collaborative teams we see in the comics industry: the most famous being Goscinny and Uderzo of the *Adventures of Asterix*. But writers in India have and are taking up the form probably because of the wide range it offers. In an e-mail interview Indian graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee was asked the question "What advantages does his form have over other media, such as the comic book?" To this his answer was:

> The French describe the comics narrative as multi-codeic. In the best cases, the text and image are locked in creative tension, never explaining the other, creating larger units of meaning. This allows for conflicting, simultaneous emotional states about both an event and its experience within a contained, coordinated space. I've used the *multivalent interpretative possibilities* to allow plots, elements, and events to overlap; emphasis mine.

However, in spite of the "multivalent interpretative possibilities" of a graphic novel it has not yet been taken as a topic of close analysis and research at par with mainstream novels. The plethora of styles they incorporate is yet to be minutely and critically evaluated. My intention will be to study the rise of graphic narrative in India, the reason for this rise, and the multiplicity of meanings and styles which the Indian writers capture in the compact structure of graphic narrative. What is to be also seen in the course of the study is what makes mainstream literature mainstream and an attempt to investigate why graphic literature is still kept outside mainstream literature?

My tentative chapter divisions will be as follows:

1. Introduction: The Graphic Novel
2. Graphic Novel in India: Rise and Popularity
3. Treatment of Socio-political Crises in Indian graphic novels
4. Depiction of Urbanity and Urban Spaces in Indian graphic novels
5. Portrayal of Women in Indian graphic novels
6.

According to the Merriam Websters Online Dictionary a graphic representation can be "a picture, map or graph used especially for illustration" or "the art or science of drawing a representation of an object on a two-dimensional surface." However, I would argue that, in a graphic novel the images or graphics do not merely serve the purpose of illustrating or repeating what is already written. The images have a story to tell: they often show what is not already written. In fact, a graphic novel may have a total absence of words or prose narratives. The reader is expected to decode the multifarious meanings embedded in the images, to read the graphic and the prose narrative at the same time. In order to read a graphic novel, one must exercise "multiple literacies". The text requires traditional decoding skills, while the images require the reader to interpret facial and body language as well as the ability to study the style in which they are presented. On the one hand, a graphic novel is a traditional reading-book; on the other hand, it is a sequential art narrative. Hence, in order to read a graphic novel, says Francisca Goldsmith in *A Reader's Advisory Guide to Graphic Novels* **"**one must be literate in both text and visual cues, able to interpret what a picture "says" and relate that content to text, while being sensitive to how image and word stand in relationship to each other on the page."

The general misconception that has prevented Graphic Novels from being considered as serious form of literature is that it is primarily for the teens. Graphic novels use a medium similar to that used by comic strips and books, that is, images in sequence. But just as in spite of using the prose medium, novels, travelogues, biographies, and periodical essays do not become the same, so is with comic books and graphic novels. The comic medium or images in sequence might not always be comical, might not have images which evoke laughter.They might not have superheroes at all. They might not be simple to decipher as they are generally thought to be. When asked the question "Do you have a well-defined reader in mind for your dexterous interplay between text and image?"

Furthermore, a graphic-narrative novel is not just a novel which has long existed but with the only difference that it now includes Graphics or images. I would argue that Graphic Narrative is not just a format but a separate form of presentation or writing (if I may use the word) altogether. In cases where previously existing dramas or novels are re-presented to the audience in graphic form: for example the graphic novel based on Robert Louis Stevenson's'

Treasure Island, then the usage of the graphic is just a format. However, there are many writers who have written books using a completely new form of expressing, their works I would catagorise as graphic narratives or graphic novels (in cases where they can indeed be called novels). I would also argue that graphic narratives have long been deprived of the academic attention it deserves simply because it is seen as a reductive form. The term used to categorise this form of writing is "graphic novel" which, I believe, is reductive in meaning. Novel as a genre has long existed with its own history, conventions and norms. A graphic novel may/may not conform to those codes of the novel. To point out a very simple definition of a novel is "an invented *prose narrative* that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events; emphasis mine."

But Will Eisner, who used the term "graphic novel" first to describe his work, does not make any mention of words when he set out to define the term. Graphic novels need not involve texts, even the texts which appear in speech balloons may be absent in a graphic novel. Graphic novel is a narrative, but a narrative through "sequential art". I would argue that graphic novel as a form of expression needs an altogether different attention as a new genre and not just as *another* format of a novel. Detective novels, psychological novel, mystery novels, gothic novel, are different kinds of novels catagorised on the basis of their content. However, the narrative style used in the graphic novels is an altogether different form.

I will devote a chapter on the rise and popularity of graphic novel in India. The reason for the rise of graphic novel as a form of art in India is also a matter of study. My attempt would be see how this form of presentation begun in India and the social, political and technological reasons leading to (and sometimes restricting) its growth. That graphic narrative is a serious form of narrative has already been shown by European masters of the form, like Speigleman, Satrape, Eisner, Miller and others. But graphic novel writing has garnered popularity only recently in India although cave paintings telling particular stories from the daily life of peasants, hunters have always been there. One should also not forget the 'Pata/Patua' culture of West Bengal, a form of storytelling involving "sequential art" much similar to the graphic narrative of today. There is a history of comics being used as a medium in India although its origin and history is much younger. *The River of Stories* by Orijit Sen published in 1994 is the first Indian graphic novel.

Graphic novels in general have few words and graphics and images play a major role in their narrative. Hence, a close study of the various styles incorporated in the many images is essential. The specific styles used by writers throughout the narrative, or their usage of different modes of presentation of the images, have a relation with the meanings they try to put forth. My special concern will be to study the depiction of the urban and portrayal of women in the select graphic novels. While doing so I would also simultaneously study the visual styles used by them. From this purpose the graphic novels I have chosen are *Corridor, Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* and *Harappa Files*, all three by Sarnath Banerjee; *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni, *Kari* by Amruta Patil, and *The Hotel at the End of the World* by Parismita Singh. All the books mentioned above have images/graphics drawn/painted by the writers themselves, they have written through their drawings, except *Sita's Ramayana* which has been illustrated by Moyna Chitrakar, a real-life 'pata/patua' artist from Bengal. All the writers mentioned use various visual styles revealing their psychological take on the narrative and leaving room for the readers to find their own.

India's many moments of political, cultural and social crisis severely affecting the country and its many individuals have been a fertile ground for many Indian graphic novels/novelists . Many writers in their short stories, novels, poems and other forms of writing have had their take on these situations of crisis. The works of these writers have been studied and appreciated. Graphic novel in India is still an infant compared to the other forms of writing but they have already started dealing with a plethora/variety of issues. A historical moment (if I may call it just a moment) of social and political crisis becomes the matter of detailed depiction in Visvajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm*. It chooses the historical date of 26th June 1975 as its beginning point. It shows how the declaration of Emergency affected, changed, disrupted the lives of countless many. To put it in the words of Vivek Kumar/master, a character in the book, Delhi Calm sets out to challenge the "fabricated truths" (202). Ghosh uses fictitious character names but his whole intention is evident. Even the very title is used in an ironical sense since the actual situation, faced by the common masses of Delhi, that is depicted is far from being calm. The story shows wit, humour, sarcasm, irony in its depiction of a crucial historical event. Thus, my intention is to study how Ghosh's critical perspective on a moment of historical significance is brought forth and how his choosing the framework of a graphic novel enhance/mar his representation.

Many graphic novelists in India have chosen an urban setting for their works. Sarnath Banerjee alone has chosen three different metropolitan cities as setting: Delhi in *Corridor,* Kolkata in *Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* and Mumbai in *Harappa Files*. Amruta Patil has also chosen Mumbai as the unsettling setting for *Kari*. These works by two different authors reveal their take on the contemporary urban India. Kari published in 2007 is set in contemporary Mumbai, the 'smog city' which reminds us of Eliot's London in "Love song for J. Alfred Prufrock". Her graphic presentation of the metropolitan is bold and outright. *The Hotel at the End of the World* is, however, set somewhere in the north- eastern region of India, the name of the place is not given. Parismita Singh's depiction is deliberately distant from the urban. She chooses a setting appropriate for the mysterious often-magical events that occur; it is a place which seems almost 'at the end of the world' frequented by few people. The style of images she uses also has the mystical quality in them. The names of the characters chosen are also significant: Pema, Kuna, Kuja. I would attempt a study of *Corridor, Kari, Harappa Files* and their (different/similar) depiction of urbanity.

How women have been portrayed in various works of fiction, what role they have played is a question that often arises in the study of various fiction. From the heading of my synopsis the question that can obviously arise in the minds of the reader is that what new have I to say? But representations vary from work to work. Graphic novels, I believe, are a different form of expression and representation chosen by the writer/illustrator. To locate the portrayal of women in the narrative (writing) and visual (illustrating) style of this "new" form of writing would be interesting as well as pertinent. *Sita's Ramayana*, *The Hotel at the End of the World*, *Kari*, *Barn owl's Wondrous Capers* and *Corridor* are texts I have chosen for study in this section.

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